THE ROGOZEN THRACIAN TREASURE

BULGARIA

BOGDAN NIKOLOV

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THE THRACIAN SILVER TREASURE FROM ROGOZEN

Over the recent decades Bulgaria gradually replenished her fund of monuments of Thracian culture and art. The Thracian gold treasures near Vulchi Trun and Panagyurishte were discovered in succession, followed by the silver treasures from Boukyovtsi, Galiche, Vladinya, Letnitsa, Loukovit, Radyuvene, Borovo and Yakimovo. A series of exquisitely crafted precious metal objects were found in rich Thracian tombs near Alexandrovo, Brezovo, Douvanli, the Mogilanska Mogila in Vratsa, Branichevo and Kralevo. The picture gradually filled out with the addition of the sculptures from the Sveshtari tomb to the toreutic works and frescoes in the Thracian tomb near Kazanluk. All this, however, was both insufficient and incapable of fully representing the culture, art and mythology of ancient Thrace. Then the cornucopia once again overflowed in Bulgaria in the first days of 1986. The biggest Thracian treasure dating from the pre–Hellenistic age was discovered near the village of Rogozen, Vratsa district (NW Bulgaria). The Rogozen treasure has been justifiably called "the find of the century", as it consists of 165 beautifully executed silver vessels, 31 of them gilded. The entire Rogozen treasure weighs 20 kg. The magnificent silver vessels had been manufactured, collected and replenished over a long period of time – from the beginning of the 5th century B.C. to the middle of the 4th century B.C., or almost 150 years. Experts were astounded and inspired by the unexpected abundance of ex-

quisite objects of precious metal, crafted by Thracian toreutic masters. They depict deities and scenes from a little known and poorly studied mythology. At least ten Thracian proper names of the owners or goldsmiths, and the names of five long forgotten ancient Thracian cities were deciphered from the inscriptions on the vessels. The Rogozen treasure abounds in masterpieces of a local school of art, established and developed in the lands of the Thracian tribe Triballi. This has proved an excellent opportunity for significant parallels with other Thracian monuments and a solid basis for following the development of Thracian artistic style over a longer time period.

The Thracian silver treasure was found almost in the very centre of the village of Rogozen. It was dug out in an empty garden, long used for growing vegetables. The entire treasure had been divided in two and hidden in two separate, but nearby holes. The first part was accidentally unearthed by the garden owner, tractor driver Ivan Dimitrov. He stumbled upon 65 silver vessels while digging a 50 cm deep irrigation canal. Immediately reporting his discovery to the mayor, the finder left the vessels in the parish. The mayor, in turn, immediately called the District Museum of History in Vratsa. A team of archaeologists headed by senior research associate Bogdan Nikolov, D.H. (Hist.) promptly arrived in Rogozen to start archaeological excavations. The team aimed to discover why the treasure had been buried there and whether this was the site of a rich Thracian funeral, or the remains of an ancient settlement. The pit in which Ivan Dimitrov discovered the vessels was cleared first, but neither traces of a funeral, nor a cultural layer of an ancient settlement were found. Clearly, the treasure had been buried unex-

pectedly during some grave danger. In view of the fact that other ancient treasures had been discovered concealed in two parts in this country, archaeologists were inclined to think that the treasure had been concealed in two parts in two separate holes. Notwithstanding the unfavourable winter conditions, the excavations went on uninterrupted until, on January 6, 1986 the archaeologists' efforts were rewarded by a remarkable success. Just five metres to the north–west of the first pit a second one, with exactly 100 silver vessels ordered in a pile, was unearthed. With the discovery of the second part of the Rogozen treasure, the vessels totaled 165. To date the Rogozen Thracian treasure is the only treasure in this country, in whose discovery archaeologists were involved – hence its even greater scientific value.

The village of Rogozen, 43 km north of the city of Vratsa, lies in the centre of the fertile Danube Valley, exactly halfway between the Balkan Range and the Danube, and between the rivers Ogosta and Iskur. Archaeologically, the region has been well–studied. The oldest human dwellings dating back to the middle, and Upper Palaeolithic, were discovered in caves in the Northern Balkan Range. Archaeological studies of several large prehistoric settlements near Baourene, Brenitsa, Gradeshnitsa and Krivodol supplied enormous scientific information on the life of the first farmers and cattle–breeders in these lands in the Neolithic and the development of human societies in the Chalcolithic and Bronze ages. The archaeological collections of rich monuments discovered, proved that these cultures were highly developed for their time and with their own longstanding tradition. They occupy a significant place among the other prehistoric cultures in the

European South–East and the Aegean. The numerous prehistoric settlements and monuments discovered on the territory of Western Bulgaria were chronologically classified according to the verified strathigraphy of the settlements near Gradeshnitsa and Krivodol, 15 to 20 km away from Rogozen. Thus Western Bulgaria was defined as an independent ethno–cultural region. The names of Gradeshnitsa and Krivodol where these monuments were first found and studied, became eponyms of two different prehistoric cultures.

There were no particular ethnic cataclysms in the region during the Late Bronze, and Early Iron ages. The old cultural tradition was preserved, albeit the period coincided with major historic events in the East and the Aegean – the downfall of the Hittite kingdom, the destruction of Troy and certain centres of Mycenaean culture. This backs the conclusion that the roots of Thracian culture (and probably of Thracian ethnos) in the region date back to the Bronze Age. A series of Thracian monuments from the Iron Age which have been discovered in Western Bulgaria testify to the existence of a local cultural tradition and artistic style, also confirmed by the decorative patterns, symbols, figures and scenes embossed on the vessels of the Rogozen Thracian treasure.

Undoubtedly the rich collection of 165 silver vessels found in Rogozen, belonged to a rich Thracian ruling family. Their splendour and magnificence are thoroughly in the spirit of the ancient Thracian aristocracy and its demonstration of power and authority through riches and luxury. The treasure was made and amassed in the period when Thracian culture was flourishing and the Thracian states on the Balkans were at the peak of their might and

ambition. Thrace's economic and cultural contacts with the Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea Hinterland soon turned it into a big centre of the cultural world in the period. In the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. Thrace marked a substantial progress in its economic, political and cultural development, outstripping by several centuries the peoples of Central and Western Europe.

Still, why was the Rogozen treasure buried in the ground? A series of military marches and invasions of Thracian lands in the latter half of the 4th century B.C. bred confusion and insecurity. The best known of those marches were led by Philip II of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great. That is why the last owner of the Rogozen treasure divided it in two, placing the silver vessels in separate sacks of non–durable fabric and burying them in two shallow holes in the ground in immediate proximity to each other. The further fate of that Thracian is a mystery, but he was probably killed or taken captive.

THE PHIALAES constitute the bulk of the silver vessels of the Rogozen treasure. They are 108, or more than twice the number of all phialaes currently kept in the museums throughout the world. The "Phiale" is an Ancient Greek word denominating a shallow bowl usually made with a boss (umbo) in the centre. Ancient Greeks, Persians, Thracians, Scythians and Romans used phialaes for pouring libations or drinking. Despite certain differences in form, they are quite widely distributed in the East and in Europe. The phialaes of Rogozen include certain hitherto unknown samples of the goldsmith's trade. The majority are decorated with geometrical, floral and animal patterns and symbols: some stylized beyond recognition, while others are quite realistic. It is worth noting that

ivy, acorn, cone, almond, lotus and palmette dominate in the floral motifs. Are they realia of some Thracian deity we know little or nothing about? Among the animal patterns most frequent are the bull's head, the lion–like gryphon and the bird, with just an occasional head of a deity.

THE PITCHERS are the second largest group among the vessels of the Rogozen treasure. They are a total of 54. These silver vessels, elegant in form and outline, are little known in the East and the Aegean – hence they were probably a local development. By their ornaments the Rogozen pitchers are of two types: pitchers decorated with geometrical, floral and animal motifs and pitchers, decorated with mythological scenes. All pitchers with ordinary decorative patterns represent a specialized profile of the Thracian goldsmith's trade. Obviously Thracian goldsmiths excellently satisfied the aesthetical taste of their customers and excellently met their preferences. The pitchers decorated with deities and cult scenes follow a strict cannon and a rigid style of iconography. Their iconographical images and patterns were familiar to Thracian craftsmen who understood them profoundly; Thracians had their own strictly corresponding figures which they skilfully reproduced in precious metal. The cannon–created tradition determined the place of each figure as well as the images accompanying it. Hence the ease and tranquillity in the distribution of patterns, scenes and figures on the pitchers decorated with Thracian mythological scenes. The cult scenes and figures depict at least two deities of the Thracian religious pantheon – the Great Goddess and Heros, the Thracian Divine Horseman. Little or nothing was known about these two deities in early

Thracian art, since they were depicted on few monuments.

Several pitchers depict the Great Thracian Goddess as a hunter with her sacred animals or as a Protectress of Nature. She is mounted on a lioness as an Amazon, or rides in chariots drawn by winged horses. Hitherto, but hypotheses and several theories – equally attractive and uncertain – existed about the Great Thracian Goddess. Until recently we were faced with a Thrace full of numerous enigmas, the greatest among them being the theme of the Great Goddess. Prior to the discovery of the Rogozen treasure we were uncertain of a personal Thracian iconography of the Great Goddess; the Rogozen treasure, however, presented us her image, a fruit of a longstanding tradition. The other Thracian deity is depicted as a horseman in different scenes and actions, the most typical among them being the boar–hunting scene. Other pitchers are decorated with wonderful processions of mythological monsters, lion–like gryphons, panthers, bulls and other beasts, all filling out or specifying a definite idea or story linked with the chief deities.

THE CUPS in the Rogozen treasure are only three, but they differ in shape and decoration. One is in the shape of a scyphus, already familiar from other finds made in this country. The other, called "kotyle" was hitherto familiar only from images on Thracian coins. Now we have a real sample, but it is still difficult to say what its purpose was. A wonderful ivy wreath is engraved on its surface; the wreath is certainly a realia of some deity. The third cup of the Rogozen treasure is decorated with a procession of animals: a goat, a deer and a bird of prey, holding in its beak a fish and a rabbit in its claws. The bottom

of the cup depicts a wolf jumping on a boar. Three similar cups have been discovered in Romania – they depict the same animals and scenes with but minute differences. Two of the Romanian cups were discovered in the tomb near Ajighiol in Northern Doubroudja, and are currently preserved in the Bucharest museum. The third was found near Iron Gates on the Danube and is in New York's Metropolitan Museum. Certain scenes have parallels with two silver helmets again discovered in Romania: one is currently in the Bucharest museum, and the other – in the Museum of Fine Arts in Detroit. The scenes on the cups and helmets are still a mystery, arousing plenty of speculations. It is known that the Thracians did not have an alphabet and their mythology was pictorial. Their deities are depicted on many works of Thracian art which have survived to the present day. The Rogozen treasure complements them substantially. Consequently, we should decipher the images and scenes with the language of art, providing we find the correct code. I believe the Rogozen treasure has opened our eyes to many things.

Bogdan Nikolov

Phial decorated with head of Appolo in relief.

Phial decorated with geometrical patterns.

Gilded pitcher decorated with boar–hunting scene.

Phial inscribed "Kotyos eg Geyston".

Phial decorated with geometrical patterns.

Phial decorated with geometrical patterns.

Pitcher with "Derveny" style geometrical ornamentation.

Phial decorated with geometrical patterns.

Pitcher with a "Boukyovtsi" style geometrical ornamentation.

Pitcher decorated with mythological scene:
"Fish, Snake and Gryphon".

Phial decorated with gryphons.

Phial decorated with geometrical patterns.

Pitcher decorated with scaly dragons and ivy pattern.

Phial decorated with lion–like gryphon and fowls in relief.

"Derveny" style pitcher decorated with stylized patterns.

Palmette–decorated gilded vase.

"Boukyovtsi" style pitcher decorated with meanders.

Phial decorated with floral patterns.

Phial decorated with geometrical patterns.

Phial decorated with cone–shaped patterns.

Pitcher decorated with geometrical patterns.

Phial decorated with human heads in relief.

Pitcher with stylized geometrical ornamentation.

Phial decorated with geometrical patterns.

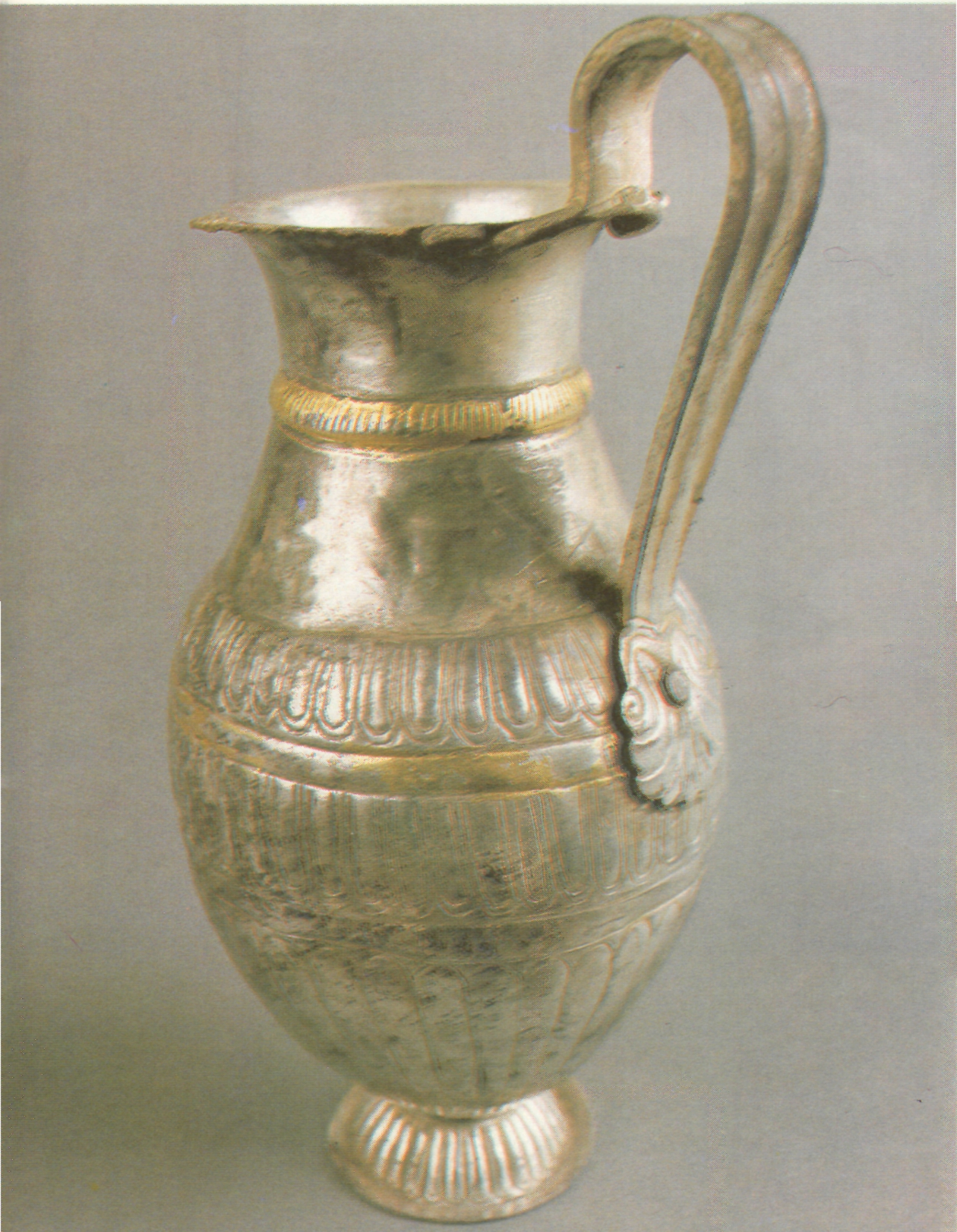
The scene on this pitcher represents Heracles's ninth labour: the seizure of the girdle of Hyppolyte, the Queen of the Amazons.

Deep phial without ornamentation.

Pitcher decorated with geometrical patterns.

Shallow phial without ornamentation.

Pitcher with stylized geometrical ornamentation.

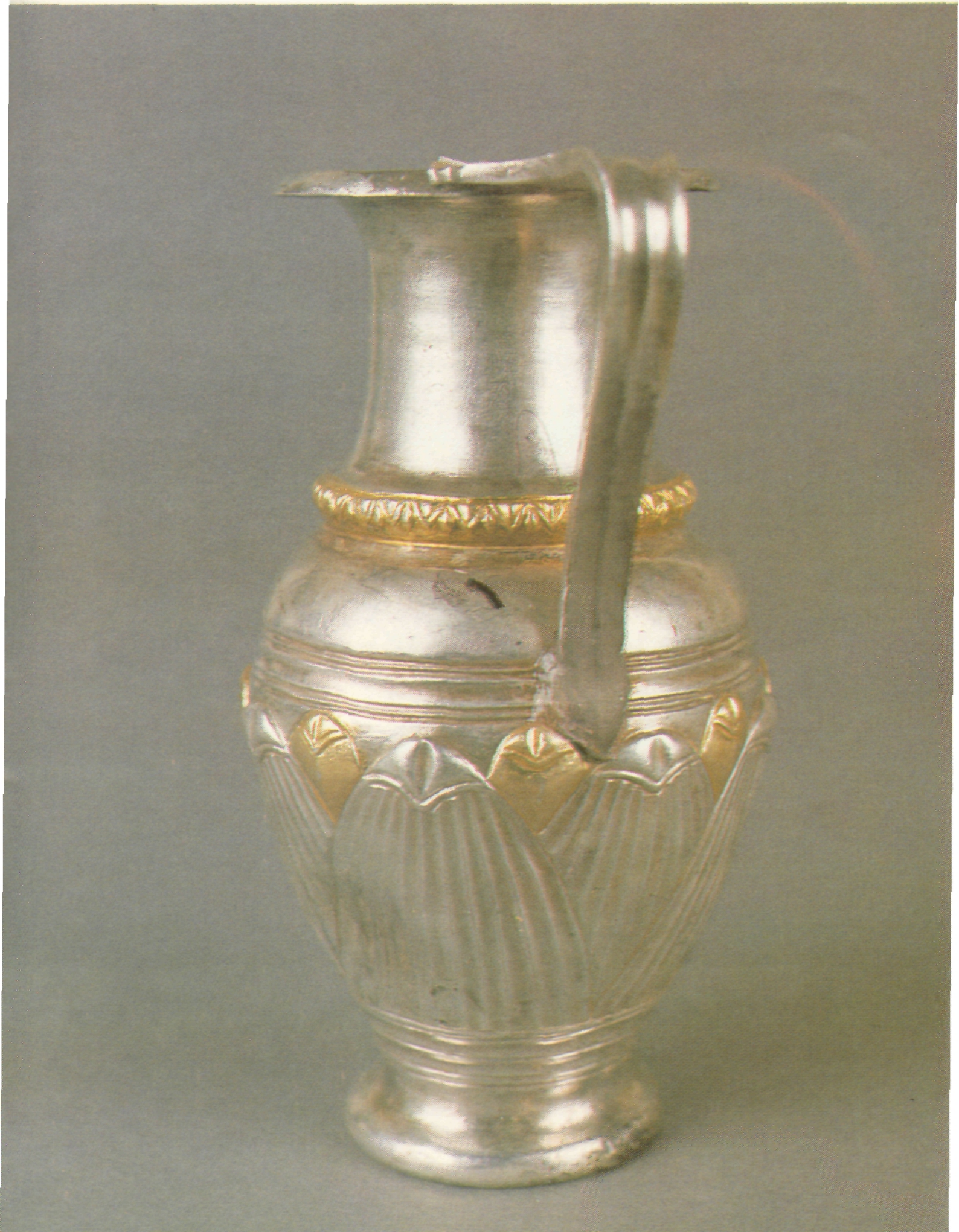


"Kotyle" cup with ivy patterns.

Pitcher decorated with geometrical patterns.

Phial decorated with geometrical patterns.

Pitcher decorated with floral and geometrical patterns.



Cup decorated with eagle holding fish in her beak.

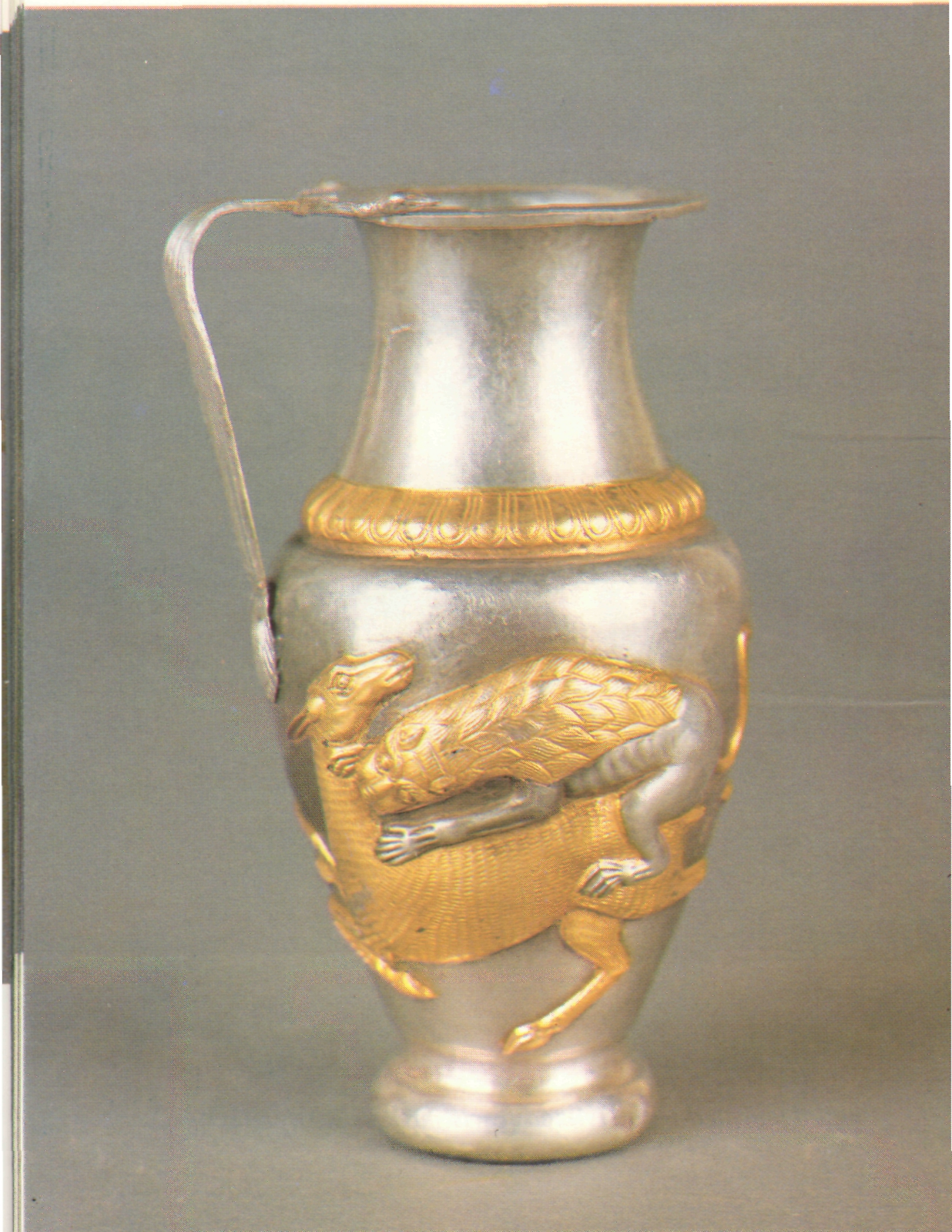
Pitcher with stylized geometrical ornamentation.

Phial inscribed "KOTYOS EX BEO".

Pitcher decorated with geometrical patterns.

Phial decorated with stylized floral patterns.

Phial decorated with stylized fowls' heads.



Phial decorated with bull heads in relief.

Pitcher decorated with animal scene: Lion jumping on a roe.

Phial decorated with lotus petals.

The scene on this pitcher: the Great Thracian Goddess mounted on a lioness.

Phial decorated with stylized lotuses and palmettes.

Pitcher decorated with geometrical patterns.

Phials and pitchers of the treasure.

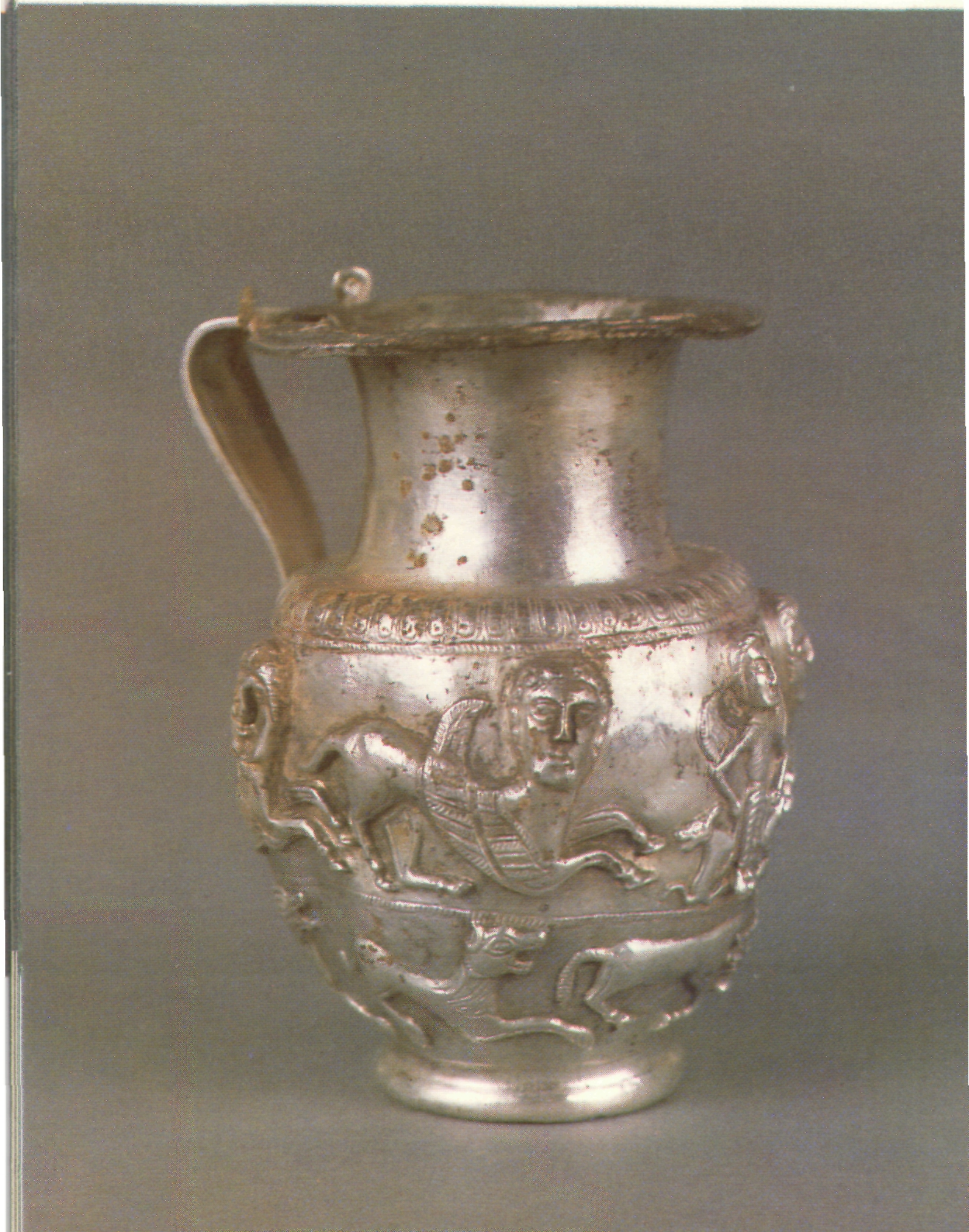


Plate decorated with cannelures.

Pitcher decorated with the figures of the Great Thracian Goddess and her sacred animals.

Gilded pitcher, decorated with mythological scene and scaly dragons.

Pitcher decorated with geometrical patterns.

Badge decorated with animal scene: wolf jumping on a boar.

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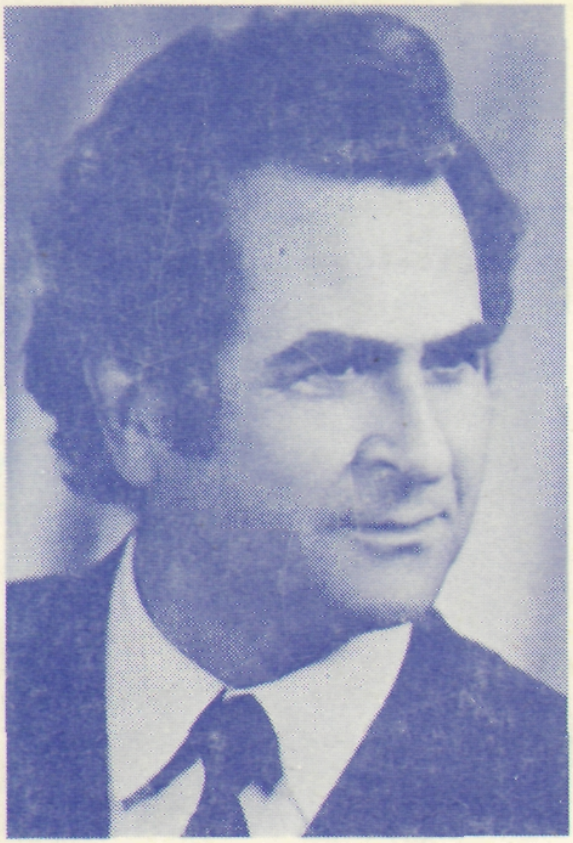

BOGDAN NIKOLOV, an archaeologist, was born on August 16, 1926 in the village of Altimir, Vratsa district. He graduated in history from the Sofia University. His D.H. dissertation was on the Chalcolithic cultures in Western Bulgaria. He holds the academic rank of senior research associate. Currently employed at the museum in the city of Vratsa, he has headed archaeological excavations at prehistoric and Thracian sites: Branitsa, Gradeshnitsa, Krivodol, Mogilanska Mogila, the necropolis near Tarnava, the Rogozen treasure, etc. He discovered and studied the unknown "Gradeshnitsa" Chalcolithic culture and the earliest tablets with pictograms. He has published over 60 scientific publications, studies and books, including: *Vratza – Art ancien.* Sofia, 1968; *Gradechnitza. Localités préhistoriques.* Sofia, 1974; *Développement du chalcolithique en Bulgarie de l'ouest* in *Ancient Bulgaria*, part 1, Nottingham, 1983; *Signes sur des ouvrages en argile de l'époque préhistorique en Bulgarie occidentale.,* in *Studia Praehistorica,* 8, Sofia, 1986; *Brenitsa (The Transition Between Two Prehistoric Cultures),* in *Obzor,* 75, Sofia, 1986.

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